

## Francisca Montoya: Farm Labor Union Organizer

By: Christine Marin. 2009

Francisca Montoya is “Mother Courage.” Her passion for social and civil justice drives her and defines her. For Francisca, social equality is *everything*. She demands nothing less.

Francisca did not speak English when she entered Dysart Elementary School in Surprise, a small farming community founded in 1937 on one square mile of land and subdivided into parcels in order to provide cheap housing for migrant agricultural workers, mainly Mexicans. Children like her were placed in the “Americanization class” until they learned English and then placed in grades equivalent to their familiarity of the language. Francisca’s thirst for knowledge and her drive for success were notable then, and they have remained the characteristics that distinguish her today. She credits her parents and siblings for helping her learn the value and importance of hard work and standing up for one’s rights. Her father, Bruno, took great pride in earning a high school education and in his bilingualism, despite his family’s poverty and hardships of their migrant lifestyle. Upon graduation, he found work as a labor contractor in the Texas fields and was admired by the Mexican workers for his honesty and kindness and for his compassion for their own lives. Francisca learned the importance of education from him. Her mother, Maria, was born in Mexico and came to the United States as a young child with her family. Their itinerant lifestyle made it difficult for her to complete her education beyond the seventh grade, but she understood the value of hard work and took pride in it. Francisca learned the importance of responsibility and commitment to one’s job from her. And she learned to compete with her brothers, refusing to be treated differently simply because of her gender.

As a young woman, Francisca encountered hardships of her own. She struggled to maintain her household and a family at the same time she sought her education at Glendale Community College. She understood too well the life of a farm worker's family and feared the consequences of failure and poverty and the lack of a good education. Being a single parent convinced her that higher education would change her life and improve her chances for success. Her pursuit of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Secondary Education, with an emphasis in History, at Arizona State University, was relentless. Francisca's social and community work, however, took her away from the academic trail, leaving her just six hours short of completing her degree. But that didn't discourage her at all. She took another avenue of education. Based on her work experience and academic credits, Francisca was accepted into the Masters Degree program in the area of Rural Studies at the private institution, Antioch International McGregor, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Her work and education took her to new places, provided her with opportunities to travel: to Mexico, Africa, the Philippines, Panama and throughout the United States. In all of this, Francisca found her own voice, earned a living and reached for higher goals. But there were the voices of others that remained in her memory: voices that emerged from time to time to remind Francisca that she had unfinished business to do. They were the voices of Mexican farm workers and their families. It was the voice of María García Montoya—her mother. *And*, it was the voice of César Estrada Chávez. Both cried out for justice and human dignity for farm workers—it was *La Causa*, the cause. It was the 1965 Delano grape strike, led by Chávez and the National Farm Worker's Alliance (NFWA), followed in 1966 when the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee (UFWOC) is formed.

To call attention to the grape strike, Chávez led a 300-mile walk in 1966 from Delano to Sacramento in a pilgrimage that ended on Easter Sunday. A similar four-day march in Arizona, from El Mirage to Glendale and then to the State Capitol in Phoenix, brought attention to the grape strike. Francisca's mother, and hundreds of others, participated in the four-day march and supported César's idea of forming a farm workers union in Arizona. On Easter Sunday, Francisca, a young child at the time, walked with her mother on the final day of the march. She understood its importance and never forgot the feeling of empowerment and courage it gave her. She carries those feelings with her today. Years later, in 1972, César Chávez came to Phoenix to protest House Bill 2134, a farm-bureau sponsored bill that restricted the formation of bargaining units for collective bargaining and discouraged the formation of a farm workers union. It also outlawed secondary boycotts and strikes at harvest time—two rights important to working men and women. Santa Rita Hall in south Phoenix became the headquarters for the United Farm Workers and Chávez was fasting. Francisca, now a teenager, was there with her mother.

Since then, Francisca's lengthy history of social activism and commitment to farm workers' rights, as well as to the rights of the poor, the forgotten, the dispossessed, and the working class, is legendary. As Assistant Director of El Centro Adelante Campesino, Incorporated; as Executive Director and labor organizer for the Arizona Farm Workers Union; as Executive Director for the Maricopa County Organizing Project (MCOP); as a Paralegal for an immigrants' rights attorney; and as Executive Director of the Stardust House, a non-profit neighborhood resource and learning center in South Phoenix, Francisca Montoya has established a strong presence on the front lines of sacrifice and hard work. And now, as the Arizona Regional Director of the César Estrada Chávez Foundation, with its headquarters in Phoenix,

Francisca Montoya works with educators, school administrators, students, parents, board members, attorneys, and political leaders to ensure that César's vision of justice and equality for all is passed on to another generation. *Sí, Se Puede. Yes, it can be done.*